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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of protagonist's sex on moral reasoning ability. The moral reasoning of 335 white, middle class high school and college students was assessed by Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT), in either its traditional format (all male protagonists) or an experimental version (all female protagonists). It was hypothesized that each sex should demonstrate higher levels of moral reasoning when responding to dilemmas with same sex protagonists. A Sex by Age by Form Multivariate Analysis of Variance revealed expected and significant age effects but no effects due to protagonist's sex (Form). However, there were significant gender effects, with females typically scoring at higher levels of moral reasoning than males. These findings contradict Rest's claims that the DIT is relatively free of any sex bias. They also contradict claims made by Gilligan (1977), Maccoby & Jacklin (1974), and Holstein (1976). Findings implicate task characteristics as a possible mediating variable promoting gender differences. (Author/MP)

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Effect of Protagonist's Sex on Assessing Gender Differences in Moral Reasoning[1]

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

"There's no reason why women shouldn't behave like rational beings," Simon asserted stolidly. Poirot said drily: "Quite frequently they do. That is even more upsetting!"

A. Christie, Death on the Nile, 1933

PS010517

Running Head: Protagonist's Sex

Footnotes

[1]This paper was presented at the 1979 biennial meeting of the Society For Research in Child Development, San Francisco, CA.

[2]Requests for reprints should be addressed to the senior author.

Abstract

To investigate the effect of protagonist's sex on moral reasoning, 355 high school and college students completed Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT) in either its traditional format (all male protagonists) or an experimental version (all female protagonists). A Sex by Age by Form Multivariate Analysis of Variance revealed expected and significant age effects but no effects due to protagonist's sex (Form). However, there were significant gender effects, with females typically scoring at higher levels of moral reasoning than males. These findings contradict Rest's claims that the DIT is relatively free of any sex bias. They also contradict claims made by Gilligan (1977), Maccoby and Jacklin (1974), and Holstein (1976). The discussion of these data focused on interpreting their meaning in relation to these contradictions and the characteristics of the DIT which may have contributed to this outcome.

Women have traditionally been viewed as second to men. Man's genesis as well as physical and physiological differences between the sexes generated naive cultural support of this differential status, support which ultimately was "explained" by theory and made fact. Consider Freud's (1925) explanation for gender differences in the realm of moral behavior: ". . . for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in man. Their superego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men (257-258)." Freud believed that these differences in morality stemmed from differences in the resolution of the Oedipal conflict. Since women could not resolve this conflict as efficiently as men, they were left with a lower level of conscience. Piaget (1932) has also noted gender differences in moral behavior and has attributed these differences to a less well-developed legal sense in girls.

Working from a Piagetian cognitive-developmental approach, Kohlberg (Kohlberg & Kramer, 1969) has proposed a three level theory of moral development: the preconventional, conventional, and postconventional levels. Within each level are two stages and each stage describes a progressive sequence of moral orientations. At the preconventional level, "good" is defined by the punitive consequences of acting (stage 1) or by the value of the act to the actor (stage 2). Conventional morality is described by an orientation toward helping others and being approved of by them (stage 3) or by a law and order orientation (stage 4). Postconventional morality reflects the use of principled reasoning, characterized by a social contract orientation (stage 5) or reliance on universal ethical principles (stage 6).

Kohlberg's theory also supports a view of women as morally divergent from men, since on his scale most women score at stage 3 and most men at stage 4. Likewise fewer women than men use principled moral reasoning (stages 5 and 6). Such gender differences have been documented by Alker and Poppen (1973), Haan,

Smith, and Block (1968), Holstein (1976), Kohlberg and Kramer (1969), Poppen (1975, 1974), and Saltzstein, Diamond, and Belenky (1972). However, sex differences were not found by Kesey (1972), Selman (1971), Sullivan, McCullough, and Stager (1970) and Weisbroth (1970).

Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) and Holstein (1976) argue that Kohlberg's stage theory might contain a sex-bias, since it was developed by a male, using all male subjects, and the protagonists in each moral dilemma are male. Maccoby and Jacklin point out that stage 2 and stage 4 reasoning includes elements of aggression and power, traits associated more with males than with females. Holstein argues that stage 3 reasoning is incompatible with males' traditional instrumental role and that stage 4 is incompatible with females' traditional expressive role. Likewise, Gilligan (1977) aruges that women's judgments are tied not only to their feelings of empathy and compassion for others but also to their pragmatism. Gilligan believes women's moral judgments reflect a focus on the "real" as opposed to the "hypothetical." This focus, reflecting women's concern for others' welfare, interferes with their ability to reason abstractly and subsequently score at the higher levels of moral reasoning.

Charges of sex bias in Kohlbergian moral judgment assessment have been dismissed rather abruptly by Rest (Reference Note 1), who has developed an objective moral judgment scale, The Defining Issues Test (DIT), based on Kohlberg's approach. Rest claims that in ". . . DIT research sex differences are rarely significant (p. 16)." He cites 22 studies and reports that only two show significant gender differences (in favor of females). Rest goes further to state that if differences do exist they are probably due to a man's use of more sophisticated moral thinking, a claim unfounded by the weight of his own evidence. Furthermore, of the 22 cited studies (four are published), only eight were submitted to the consistency check, a measure of participants' protocol reliability, and this seems to further weaken Rest's claims. Thus,

his statement that "research efforts in DIT studies could be better put elsewhere than further exploring the sex variable (p. 21)" seems premature at best.

This report describes an attempt to further explore the sex variable. Specifically we wanted to investigate the effects of protagonists' sex on gender differences in moral judgments. If it is the relatively lower level of cognitive sophistication that accounts for gender differences, then women should reason the same regardless of the sex of the protagonist in moral dilemmas. However, if the purported gender differences occurring are due to a failure to completely identify with male protagonists (as implied by Gilligan, Holstein, and Maccoby and Jacklin) then exposure to sex-appropriate protagonists may influence levels of moral judgment. Therefore it was hypothesized that each sex sould demonstrate higher levels of moral reasoning when responding to dilemmas with same-sex protagonists.

METHOD

Subjects. All participants were white, middle-class, and enrolled in private high schools or a private university in New Orleans, Louisiana. Originally 486 volunteered to participate and after applying the consistency check, 355 were retained. Of these 91 were in grade 9, 97 were in grade 12, and 167 were undergraduate college students. There were 192 females and 163 males.

Instruments. Moral reasoning was assessed by Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT), an objective version of Kohlberg's Moral Maturity Scale (Rest, 1975). The DIT requires participants to select responses from prototypic items representing different stages of moral reasoning (2-6) for each of six dilemmas. For each, participants evaluate a set of 12 issues, each of which exemplifies a distinctive characteristic of a stage, by rating their importance (most to no) to the dilemma's resolution. Participants then rank their four most important choices from within this set. As part of the 12 issue items, nonsense items

are included to detect responding just to verbal complexity over content. Issues are matched on word length, complexity of syntax, and use of unusual words. For each dilemma, several issues representing each stage are presented, enabling participants to have a fairly wide selection range. Finally these dilemmas focus on the value of life versus property, civil disobedience, the morality of imprisonment, freedom of speech, racial discrimination, and euthanasia.

Two overall scores are provided, the P score, which represents the amount of principled reasoning (stages 5 and 6) used, and the D score, which indexes a participant's preference for principled over other forms of reasoning. In addition, scores for use of stages 2 through 6 and for M (use of meaningless items) and A (antiestablishment orientation) are possible. The test-retest reliability of the DIT has been reported as .58 for long-term change (2 years) and .81 for short-term change (2 weeks) by Rest (Reference note 2).

A consistency check was run on each subject to eliminate either incomplete or inconsistent data. Data was considered unreliable if there were inconsistencies on more than 2 dilemmas, or if the number of inconsistencies on any story exceeded 8 instances. Additionally, protocols were discarded if two stories had more than 9 items rated the same (Rest, Reference note 2). An inconsistent response occurs, for example, when a participant has differences in the rankings and ratings of an issue. If an issue is rated as "most important" but is then ranked lower than an issue rated as of "little importance," an inconsistency has occurred.

Procedure. To test our hypothesis, Form 1 (the experimental form) was created by changing the sex of any dilemma's protagonist from male to female. Form 2, the traditional form, represents Rest's original DIT. To assess gender differences, one-half of the participants received Form 1 and the remainder received Form 2. The DIT was administered in group testing situations by one of two female

experimenters or by one male experimenter. All were white college students. Test booklets were distributed in such a manner that every other subject received a different form. The cover sheet of the booklet was identical on both forms and contained standardized instructions for completing the DIT.

RESULTS

Because the consistency check is an indicator of the useability of a participant's data, a comparison was made for the P and D scores between those with internally inconsistent questionnaires and those whose questionnaires were internally consistent. Those with inconsistent questionnaires were rejected if significant differences occurred on the P and D scores. This initial check revealed that on both P and D scores, "inconsistent" participants scored lower ($\bar{X}$s = 17.34, 18.37 respectively) than did "consistent" participants ($\bar{X}$s = 20.80 and 21.57 respectively), $F\ (1,482) = 15.524$, $p < .0001$ for P scores and $F\ (1,484) = 19.056$, $p < .00001$, for D scores. Thus, all subsequent analyses include only participants whose questionnaire data was consistent.

To determine if the purported gender differences in moral reasoning were related to females' lower level of cognitive sophistication or to their failure to identify fully with a male protagonist, a Sex by Form by Age Multivariate Analysis of Variance was performed on the stage scores and the M, A, P, and D scores. This analysis yielded a highly significant Wilk's Lamda of .59, $F(99,2374) = 1.88$, $p < .001$. Significant Wilk's Lamdas were yielded also for the Sex, Form, and Age effects, but not for any of the interactions. Because of these significant multivariate effects, separate univariant analyses on these various scores were therefore warranted.

As expected, age significantly affected most of the variables, $F\ (18,570) = 3.84$, $p < .001$. Significant age effects were found for use of stages 3 through 6 reasoning and on the P and D scores. Only the A and M scores showed no age

effect (See Table 1).

Contrary to Rest's assertions, sex did produce significant effects, $F\ (9,335) = 2.31$, $p < .02$. These effects were most apparent in stage 3 and 5 reasoning as well as in the use of principled reasoning (P and D scores) (See Table 1). However this difference was not due, as Gilligan and Holstein claim, to females scoring lower than males on their use of higher moral reasoning and vice versa; in fact, an almost opposite pattern was evident. For stage 5 and for P and D scores, females scored significantly higher than males, while on stage 3 reasoning, males scored higher than females. Furthermore there were no significant sex by age or sex by form interactions.

No significant differences can be attributed to the sex of the protagonists (Form), though there was a trend in this direction for the P score, $F\ (9,335) = 1.74$, $p < .08$. Despite the lack of a significant multivariate form effect, it is interesting to note that when the protagonist was male, participants had significantly higher M scores (use of meaningless items) than when the protagonist was female, univariate $F\ (1,343) = 5.78$, $p < .02$. Paradoxically, there was also a tendency for stage 5 scores to be higher when the protagonists were male. Table 2 lists means for all scores by form, sex, and age.

Insert Tables 1 & 2 Here

DISCUSSION

The lack of a significant form effect indicates that the sex of a moral dilemma protagonist does not contribute reliably to gender differences in moral reasoning ability. Even more surprising, however, is the finding that females exhibit higher levels of principled moral reasoning than do males, regardless

of age or form. Equally perturbing, males exhibit significantly higher usage of stage 3 reasoning than do females. This outcome is essentially a reversal of Holstein's findings and contradicts assertions made by Gilligan, Maccoby and Jacklin, and Holstein that females are more likely to use stage 3 reasoning since it is characterized by concern for others and receiving approval from others.

At first glance this reversal in typical stage of usage may seem suspect. However, Gilligan's and Maccoby and Jacklin's charges are based on general interpretations of this literature, and Holstein's claim, while data-based, rests on the results of a longitudinal investigation with a three year time gap between measurements. In addition, in an unpublished study, Orchowsky and Jenkins (Reference Note 3) offer data to support our findings. Using a short-form of the DIT and college students in Virginia, they found that females' mean P scores (37.0) were higher than males' mean P scores (32.2) when the protagonist was male. Likewise, Rest, Cooper, Coder, Masanz and Anderson (1974) and Schomberg and Balkcum (Reference Note 4) report gender differences favoring females in DIT moral reasoning scores. Thus, at least in DIT research, when a gender difference occurs it seems to favor females. Obviously Rest's claims that gender differences are not meaningfully related to DIT performance are unwarranted.

The major difference between Rest's and Kohlberg's approaches lies in format. Kohlberg relies on participants generating their own responses whereas Rest provides a response format and participants select one closest to their views. This difference in format (spontaneous production versus comprehension and preference) may account for the observed gender differences. Males may function better when generating their own rationale for resolving a moral dilemma; females may function better on a more objective moral reasoning assessment strategy.

Gilligan offers an interesting hypothesis concerning the reasoning abilities of women by suggesting that they are more bound by the immediate parameters of a moral situation as more of their experience has been restricted by the traditional roles of wife and mother. According to Gilligan, women tend to conceptualize hypothetical dilemmas as if they were real-life situations, thereby using more concrete reasoning and problem solving skills. In contrast, men are encouraged to develop cognitive abilities associated with the masculine role, such as autonomous thinking. It may be that women use more concrete reasoning when the task requires that they produce responses or rationales for moral issues. When presented with an objective choice format, women seem to overcome the tendency to view matters in a concrete, real-life context and exhibit a preference for more abstract reasoning.

The presence of significant age effects comes as no surprise and warrants no further discussion. However, there is one age trend that does warrant some mention. Even though the multivariate Form by Age interaction was not significant, it approached it ($p < .17$) and was the only interaction to generate any significant univariate Fs. These univariate Fs indicated that older participants used less stage 3 reasoning when the protagonist was male $F\ (2,343) = 4.44$, $p < .012$. Likewise older participants used more principled reasoning when the protagonist was male, $F\ (2,343) = 2.99$, $p < .051$, for P scores and $F\ (2,343) = 3.96$, $p < .02$, for stage 5A scores only. This tendency for older participants to exhibit higher levels of higher moral reasoning and lower levels of lower moral reasoning when the protagonist is male may reflect the traditionally higher status assigned to males in our culture (Der-Karabetian & Smith, 1977).

In summary, this study attempted to assess the effects of protagonist's sex on moral reasoning ability. While gender differences did emerge in these data, they can not be directly linked to sex of the protagonist used in moral dilemmas. Instead of supporting Rest's claim that gender differences in moral

reasoning research are not an important variable, these findings, that women use higher levels of moral reasoning than men, implicate task characteristics as a possible mediating variable promoting gender differences. Such an implication only highlights the importance of consideration of gender differences in further research.

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Table 1

Summary of F Values for Moral Reasoning Scores by Age, Sex, and Form

Scores	Age		Sex		Form	
	F	P	F	P	F	P
Stage 3	8.79	.00	11.30	.00	0.01	.91
Stage 4	10.80	.00	0.58	.44	0.75	.39
Stage 5A	15.68	.00	8.57	.00	1.83	.18
Stage 5B	8.47	.00	3.56	.06	2.83	.09
Stage 6	2.47	.09	2.61	.11	3.23	.07
Stage A	0.74	.47	1.62	.20	0.11	.74
M Score	0.62	.54	0.00	.95	5.78	.02
P Score	20.63	00	12.40	.00	0.18	.67
D Score	20.94	.00	4.79	.03	0.66	.42

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Ninth-, Twelfth-, and College Students' DIT Scores By Form and Sex

	Ninth Grade				Twelfth Grade				College			
	Form 1		Form 2		Form 1		Form 2		Form 1		Form 2	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Stage 3	9.24	13.04	13.46	13.43	9.11	10.02	8.42	10.67	9.35	12.10	7.44	9.88
	(5.45)	(5.33)	(5.42)	(5.33)	(4.96)	(5.67)	(5.34)	(5.21)	(5.70)	(5.03)	(5.30	(5.72)
Stage 4	21.77	21.04	20.52	21.68	21.36	21.13	20.76	22.33	18.16	19.10	16.28	17.05
	(6.70)	(7.68)	(6.98)	(5.33)	(6.79)	(6.55)	(7.72)	(5.70)	(5.73)	(6.83)	(7.54)	(6.03)
Stage 5A	13.70	11.00	11.60	9.15	14.68	14.45	13.11	11.67	15.64	13.94	17.59	15.26
	(5.40)	(6.38)	(5.23)	(5.07)	(4.80)	(5.80)	(5.42)	(6.18)	(5.31)	(5.27)	(5.67)	(5.99)
Stage 5B	3.31	2.04	3.09	3.70	3.08	3.70	4.22	2.18	4.54	3.84	5.24	5.10
	(2.87)	(2.40)	(2.87)	(4.35)	(3.25)	(4.35)	(3.50)	(2.33)	(3.48)	(3.50)	(3.13)	(3.78)
Stage 6	2.54	2.38	2.27	2.33	2.79	1.91	3.89	3.18	3.17	2.59	4.04	3.16
	(2.06)	(2.12)	(2.70)	(2.20)	(2.94)	(2.74)	(2.96)	(2.54)	(3.03)	(2.42)	(3.56)	(3.56)
Stage A	1.62	3.42	2.14	2.66	2.57	2.58	2.03	1.97	2.35	2.59	3.10	2.75
	(2.22)	(2.96)	(2.26)	(2.94)	(2.27)	(2.25)	(2.14)	(2.52)	(2.66)	(2.34)	(2.88)	(2.65)

Table 2 (Continued)

M Score	2.00	2.15	2.80	2.15	1.43	2.72	3.19	2.38	2.39	2.14	2.81	3.13
	(2.03)	(2.29)	(2.30)	(1.98)	(1.55)	(2.41)	(2.32)	(2.39)	(2.10)	(2.40)	(2.49)	(2.24)
P Score	19.55	15.42	16.95	15.18	20.82	19.08	21.22	17.02	23.35	20.36	26.87	23.52
	(7.51)	(6.98)	(6.67)	(7.68)	(7.34)	(7.54)	(9.46)	(7.77)	(6.69)	(8.11)	(7.82)	(9.20)
D Score	19.41	16.24	18.65	16.66	21.00	21.42	22.71	20.41	23.01	22.61	25.88	23.27
	(6.90)	(7.77)	(5.88)	(6.17)	(7.65)	(6.08)	(6.81)	(8.95)	(5.24)	(6.12)	(6.52)	(8.11)

Note: Form 1 protagonists are females; form 2 protagonists are male.